It’S the Mindset That Matters: the Role of Construal Level and Message Framing in Influencing Consumer Conservation Behaviors

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Given that past research regarding the effects of message framing on conservation behaviors has produced mixed results, this research elucidates when loss versus gain framed messages are most effective in influencing consumer recycling by examining the moderating role of whether a more concrete or abstract mindset is activated. Across two laboratory experiments and one field study, loss frames were more efficacious paired with lower-level, concrete mindsets, whereas gain frames were more effective paired with higher-level, abstract mindsets. This is consistent with our matching hypothesis, wherein a pairing of messages that activate more concrete (abstract) mindsets leads to enhanced processing fluency, increased efficacy, and, as a result, more positive recycling outcomes. The findings have implications for marketers, consumers, and society as a whole.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1007079/eacr/vol9/E-09

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Given that past research regarding the effects of message framing on conservation behaviors has produced mixed results, this research elucidates when loss versus gain framed messages are most effective in influencing consumer recycling by examining the moderating role of whether a more concrete or abstract mindset is activated. Actions can be construed at varying levels of abstraction, from low levels, specifying how it is performed; to high levels, specifying why it is performed (e.g., Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope 2004). In the case of recycling, one could think about the behavior in terms of lower level processes and actions (e.g., “I will recycle by saving paper and aluminum cans”) or think about the behavior in terms of higher level purposes (e.g., “I will recycle to help the environment”). It was predicted that (1) consumers would exhibit positive recycling behaviors when presented with a concrete “how” construal in combination with a loss framed message, and (2) consumers would exhibit positive recycling behaviors when presented with an abstract “why” construal in combination with a gain framed message.

In study 1 we examine in a lab context the notion that loss (gain) frames are more effective when paired with lower-level, concrete (higher-level, abstract) thinking rather than higher-level, abstract (lower-level, concrete) thinking by directly manipulating the consumer’s mindset. As anticipated, when a concrete mindset was activated, participants reported more positive recycling intentions in response to the loss frame as opposed to the gain frame. When an abstract mindset was activated, participants reported more positive recycling intentions in response to the gain frame rather than the loss frame. Study 1 highlights that when the individual focuses on the behavior of recycling in more concrete terms, loss frames are more successful in generating positive recycling intentions than are gain frames. Conversely, when the individual focuses on the behavior at a higher level of abstraction, gain frames are more effective in generating positive recycling intentions than are loss frames. Thus, both types of frames can be efficacious in influencing consumer recycling intentions, and it is the consumer’s mindset (i.e., concrete versus abstract) that is instrumental in determining which message frame will be most effective.

Study 2 included 390 households in a North American metropolitan neighborhood which were assigned to one of 5 conditions (4 experimental conditions and 1 control group). Marketing materials were prepared in partnership with the City to ensure that branding elements were consistent with other communications about the recycling program. A two-sided door hanger, printed on recyclable paper, was generated. On one side of the hanger was the frame manipulation, and on the other side of the frame the construal manipulation was presented. Ratings of recycling behaviors were taken at two time points; the initial measurement provided a baseline of behavior prior to distribution our experimental manipulation. The following week, the door hangers were delivered to each of randomly assigned subsections of the neighborhood (e.g., loss/how, gain/how, loss/why, gain/why) and the control condition received no message. During the third week, the post-test measurements of recycling behavior were taken. Trained raters evaluated whether or not the household participated, the volume and the variety of materials in the bin. As hypothesized, loss frames were more efficacious when paired with lower-level, concrete mindsets, whereas gain frames were more effective when paired with higher-level, abstract mindsets. Pairing messages about losses with how messages yielded significant improvements in participation, volume and variety of recycling material contributed. Similarly, pairing messages about gains with why messages significant improvements in participation, volume and variety of recycling material contributed.

The goal of study 3 was to further highlight the mechanism driving these effects within a lab context. It was proposed that a pairing of a loss (gain) frame with a more concrete (abstract) mindset will lead to a match of processing styles, thus enhancing processing fluency or ease of understanding and processing meanings (e.g., Lee and Aaker 2004). We explicitly test this processing account in Study 3 and propose that a match between message frame and mindset leads to enhanced processing fluency. One potential outcome of enhanced processing fluency is perhaps a feeling of ease, which may in turn influence perceived self-efficacy (Bandura 1977). Such feelings of efficacy may then lead to greater recycling intentions and behaviors. As anticipated, when a “how” appeal was presented, participants reported more positive recycling intentions in response to the loss frame (as opposed to the gain frame). When presented with a “why” appeal, participants reported more positive recycling intentions in response to the gain frame rather than the loss frame. We proposed that the interaction between frame and appeal type will be mediated by fluency to predict efficacy, and that, in turn, efficacy would mediate the effect of fluency on recycling intentions. As predicted, the indirect effect of the interaction (between message frame and advertising appeal) on recycling intentions was mediated by a processing fluency → perceived efficacy pathway.

The results of study 3 shed light on the process underlying the effects. The findings suggest that the mechanism underlying our matching effect (whereby a match of loss/concrete and gain/abstract lead to favorable intentions) relates to both processing fluency and perceived efficacy. That is, a match in terms of message frame and appeal type leads to enhanced subjective ease of processing, which in turn predicts enhanced perceptions of efficacy and subsequent increases in positive recycling intentions. This is a novel finding, showing that ease of processing can lead to enhanced perceptions of ease of doing. Finally, other potential mediators such as involvement, positive mood, and negative mood did not readily account for the results.

Taken together, the findings of our three studies are consistent with our matching hypothesis. In particular, pairing messages that activate more concrete (abstract) mindsets leads to enhanced subjective ease of processing, which in turn predicts enhanced perceptions of efficacy and subsequent increases in positive recycling outcomes.